

Ethical Egoism

Common-Sense Morality

- Morality as it is commonly understood makes the general implicit assumption that other peoples' interests have moral weight that we must weigh against our own interests in making moral decisions.
- “[Morality] assumes we have duties to others, simply because there are people who could be helped or harmed by what we do.” Rachels p. 63.
- But perhaps we should question this assumption! Could it be wrong?

The Two Egoisms

- There are two related theories that question this assumption:
 1. Psychological Egoism: The **Psychological Theory** that humans **do** always act exclusively out of self-interest.
 2. Ethical Egoism: The **Moral Theory** that humans **should** act exclusively out of self-interest.
 1. PE Is a **descriptive claim** about the way the world is.
 2. EE Is a **normative claim** about how the world should be.

Psychological Egoism

- If PE is true, altruism is impossible and moral theorizing about the interests of others, and how we should take them into account in our actions, is pointless—a naïve exercise doomed to failure.
- Is altruism possible? Can we, in the end, be motivated and act on the interests of others beside ourselves?
- Examples of altruism:?

Examples of Altruism

- Raoul Wallenberg:
 - Swedish Businessman who spent a portion of WWII in Budapest Hungary.
 - His response to the Nazis was to convince the Hungarian government to stop deporting Jews.
 - When the Hungarian government was replaced by a Nazi puppet regime he began issuing “Swedish Protection Passes” to thousands of Jews claiming they were involved in activities vital to the Swedish.
 - He also found places for Jews to hide, and when they were discovered he physically placed himself between them and the Nazis and said “you will have to shoot me first.”
 - Wallenberg is credited with saving over 15,000 lives.

Examples of Altruism

- Osceola McCarty:
 - African-American woman in deep southern Mississippi who worked as a maid her whole life.
 - She never owned a car, at 80+ years old she still walked over a mile to the nearest grocery store pushing her own shopping cart.
 - Over her lifetime she saved every penny she could, and at age 87 she gave her entire savings of \$150,000 to endow a scholarship fund at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Examples of Altruism

- Micheal Monsoor:
 - Stationed at Ramadi, Iraq to help train Iraqi forces.
 - On Sept. 29, 2006 Michael and his platoon found themselves being fired upon from several directions at once. Michael, 3 other seals and a number Iraqi soldiers sought desperate refuge on a rooftop and took up defensive positions.
 - With the platoon spread around the roof, Michael was the Navy Seal closest to an escape route.
 - But when a grenade flew over the ledge, thumped him in the chest and fell to the ground, he didn't dive for cover.
 - Instead he threw himself onto the grenade, smothering its deadly blast with his own body. Everyone on the rooftop survived but Michael.
 - Michael was post-humously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The Self-Interest as Desire Fulfillment Account

- Perhaps, says the psychological egoist, these seeming acts of pure altruism can be explained in a way consistent with egoism.
 1. No one acts intentionally and of their own free will without desiring to act thus.
 2. In acting thus everyone is fulfilling their own desires.
 3. Fulfilling one's own desires is acting in one's own self-interest.

Therefore, all intentional actions are motivated by self-interest.

Problems with the Desire Fulfillment Account

- 1st problem: Makes PE trivially true. Simply defines “self-interested action” as any intentional action.
- 2nd problem: Makes for very implausible claims regarding previous examples of altruism.
- Consider the Micheal Monsoor Case:

Problems with the Desire Fulfillment Account

- If the self-interest as desire account holds then Michael Monsoor was acting out of self-interest. OK, let us accept that for the moment.
 - Now imagine another soldier in the same situation who, instead of throwing himself on the grenade, takes his platoon-mate next to him (who was about to dive for cover) and throws that him on the grenade, saving himself at the unwilling expense of his buddy.
 - If the self-interest as desire fulfillment account holds, then both Michael and the second soldier were acting in their own self-interest in the exact same sense—because both were fulfilling their desires: one by willingly throwing himself on the grenade, the other by throwing his unwilling buddy on the grenade.
 - These seem like acts at the opposite ends of the “acting in self-interest” scale. Does it seem plausible to claim they were both the exact same kind of self-interested act?

Response to the Desire Fulfillment Account

- A way to respond to the Desire Fulfillment Account is to offer a better, more plausible and intuitive account of what “self-interest” means.
- “In assessing whether an action is self-interested, the issue is not *whether* the action is based on a desire; the issue is *what kind of desire it is based on*. If what you want is to help someone else, then your motive is altruistic, not self-interested.” Rachels P. 72
- How would this understanding of “self-interest” assess the two soldier cases just discussed? Would it distinguish them as different kind of acts? On what basis? Is the distinction intuitively plausible?

The Awful Argument

- In the past Psychological Egoism and Ethical Egoism have been linked in the following deeply flawed argument:
 1. Psychological Egoism is true. Humans can only act out of self-interest.
 2. Therefore it must be true that humans should only act out of self-interest.

Conclusion: Ethical Egoism must be true.

The Awful Argument

- Why is the Awful Argument not sound?
- First and foremost we have just argued that premise 1 is not true. So that is enough to insure the failure of this argument.
- But even if we were to grant the truth of Premise 1 (PE), the argument would fail.
- Can anyone tell me why?

The Awful Argument

1. Psychological Egoism is true. Humans can only act out of self-interest.
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The Is/Ought Gap

- The argument crosses the is/ought gap, this is otherwise known as the naturalistic fallacy.
- You cannot draw a normative conclusion from a purely descriptive premise. Just because something **is** the way it is, doesn't mean it **should be** the way it is.
- Just because every known human society has had murders committed in it doesn't mean that all societies should have murderers.
- Similarly, just because we may not psychologically have any choice but to act selfishly, does not mean that there is also normative pressure on us to act selfishly.

The Awful Argument

- Therefore the Awful Argument is neither valid nor Sound.
 1. Even if we grant the premises, the conclusion does not follow (invalid).
 2. Furthermore, the premises are not true.

Ethical Egoism

- So at this point we will set aside Psychological Egoism and focus on Ethical Egoism exclusively.
- EE: The doctrine that each person ought always to pursue his or her own self interest exclusively.

Clarifications on EE

- Two Clarifications of EE.
 1. Does not rule out helping others incidentally.
 - Coincidental aid (or harm) to others is not ruled out, but it is also **not** a relevant moral reason for or against an action. Effects on others are morally neutral according to EE.
 - Cancelled assignment case.
 2. Self-interest is **not** defined by our simple short-term desires—what we want to do.
 - Instead self-interest is defined by our actual objective long-term interests.
 - Partying and not studying case.
 - Heroin fix case.

2 Arguments for Ethical Egoism

1. The argument that altruism is self-defeating.
 2. The argument that Ethical Egoism is consistent with commonsense morality.
- We will take each of these in turn.

The Argument that Altruism is Self-defeating

- First Argument for EE: The argument that altruism is self-defeating.
 - Each of us has privileged access to our own interests and **not** those of others. Therefore when we aim to help others with what we perceive as their interests we will often do more harm than good.
 - “Looking out for others” makes those others objects of charity and is an invasion of privacy.
 - Making others objects of charity robs them of their dignity and self-respect.

Responses to the “Altruism is Self-defeating” Argument

- First, it seems clear that at least in some instances I know the interests of others and can act on them without significant risk of doing more harm than good.
 - Shipwreck case.
- Second, the bigger problem is that the argument relies on a hidden premise that is completely inconsistent with Ethical Egoism.
 - We can see this if we lay the argument out in a more formal way.

Responses to the “Altruism is Self-defeating” Argument

1. We ought to do whatever will best promote everyone’s interests.
 2. The best way to promote everyone’s interests is for each of us to pursue our own interests exclusively.
 3. Therefore, each of us should pursue our own interests exclusively.
- Premise 1. is a altruistic premise, not an egoistic one, but it is necessary for the argument to succeed.

The Argument that EE is consistent with Commonsense Morality

- Some advocates of EE have argued that it supports common moral rules.
 - Don't lie. (people will distrust us, lie to us in return, this frustrates our interests)
 - Don't harm. (people harm us in return, this frustrates our interests)
 - Keep Promises. (Can't trust others to keep their promises, this frustrates our interests)

The Argument that EE is consistent with Commonsense Morality

- The reason in each case that the rules should be followed is that not doing so frustrates long-term interests.
- The first problem is that if these effects can be taken away, then lying, harming and breaking promises become not just permissible, but obligatory.
 - Hermit case.

The Argument that EE is consistent with Commonsense Morality

- The second problem is that even if we accept the argument, it does not prove enough to establish EE as the correct moral theory.
- It may be true that your self-interest leans in the direction of not committing murder due to the long-term consequences, but this does not establish the fact that these are the only reasons not to commit murder.
- Instead, it seems perfectly consistent with these claims to say that murder is also (or actually) wrong *because it is the unjustified destruction of an autonomous moral being*.

Three Arguments Against Ethical Egoism

1. EE endorses wickedness.
2. Kurt Baier's arguments that EE can't handle conflicts of interest.
3. The charge of Arbitrariness.

We will take each argument in turn.

1. EE Endorses Wickedness

- True newspaper stories:
 1. A paramedic injects emergency patients with sterile water in order to sell the morphine.
 2. Parents feed their baby acid so they can fake a lawsuit about tainted formula.
 3. A nurse rapes two patients while they are unconscious.
 4. A man who was \$90,000 in debt shoots his mailman seven times because he prefers prison to homelessness.
- Clearly, if they hadn't been found out, these actions would have been in each of the actor's interests. Should we really endorse them as moral???

2. Baier's Conflict of Interest Argument

- Question: Who gets the last piece of pizza?



- The spoiled kid
- Or the hungry homeless veteran?

2. Baier's Conflict of Interest Argument

- According to Baier, EE doesn't give us a clear answer in cases where there is a conflict of interest such as this one.
- The Ethical Egoist could simply claim that it is obligatory for both the spoiled kid and the veteran to go for the pizza, and the one who gets it is the moral victor.
- But is "just fight it out" a moral theory?
- Shouldn't a moral theory at least give us a framework for evaluating which one deserves it more? This certainly seems preferable to "might makes right."

3. The Arbitrariness Argument

- Principle of Equal Treatment:
 - We should treat people the same way unless there is a relevant difference between them. To do so is arbitrary discrimination.
- Clarification:
 - This does not mean insuring the same outcome for everyone! But giving everyone an equal opportunity for a particular outcome.
 - Vietnam Draft Example.

3. The Arbitrariness Argument

- There are lots of doctrines that violate this requirement against arbitrary discrimination.
 - Can you think of some examples?
 1. Racism
 2. Sexism
 3. Ageism
 4. Classism
 5. Sizeism
 6. Nationalism?
 - These doctrines privilege a certain group for no relevant reason.

3. The Arbitrariness Argument

- Egoism also privileges on particular set of persons over others, namely yourself over everyone else.
- The question is: Is Egoism one of the bad 'isms?
- If there is a good reason to discriminate against everyone else it is not a bad 'ism.
- If there is no good reason, it is as bad as racism or sexism, and to be dismissed as readily.

3. The Arbitrariness Argument

- Imagine yourself as a refugee in Darfur. You stumble upon a cache of food. Egoism says you should take it for yourself as food is scarce.
- Now we might ask, why shouldn't you share the food? Why do you privilege yourself over everyone else?
 - Does hunger affect others any less than you?
 - Are others less deserving?
 - Are you more intelligent?
 - Do you enjoy life more than everyone else?
 - In short, what makes you so special?
- Failing a satisfactory answer egoism is an unacceptably arbitrary doctrine and should be dismissed as a serious moral contender.